




The Incredible Journey

by Sheila Burnford


*Illustrated by
Lars Justinen*

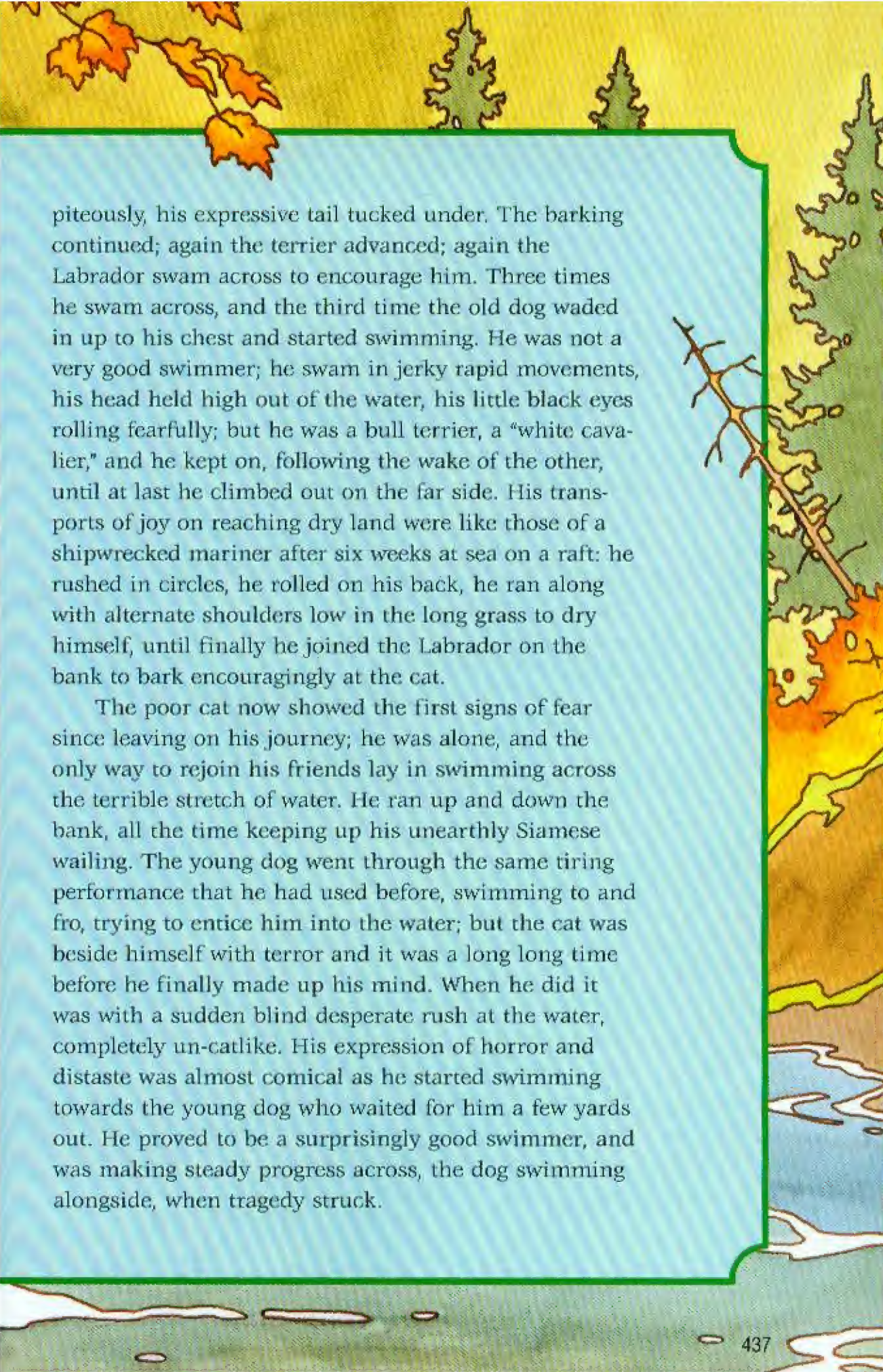
Can you imagine trekking two hundred miles through the wilderness without a map or provisions? Determined to reach their home, three extraordinary house pets set out on such a journey. A daring young Labrador retriever, a crafty old bull terrier, and a proud Siamese cat display fierce loyalty as they brave their way home through rugged Canadian forests.



The following day the travelers came down from the hills to find themselves on the banks of a river running north and south. It was about a hundred feet across to the far bank, and although shallow enough in the ordinary way, was far too deep for the animals to cross without swimming. The young dog led the way downstream for some distance looking for a means of crossing, as it was obvious that his companions would not even wet their feet if they could possibly help it, both sharing a great dislike of water. Once or twice he plunged in and swam around, looking back at the other two, obviously trying to entice them by showing them how easy it was, but they remained sitting close together on the bank, united in misery, and he was forced to continue trotting downstream, becoming increasingly worried as he went, aware that it was the wrong direction.

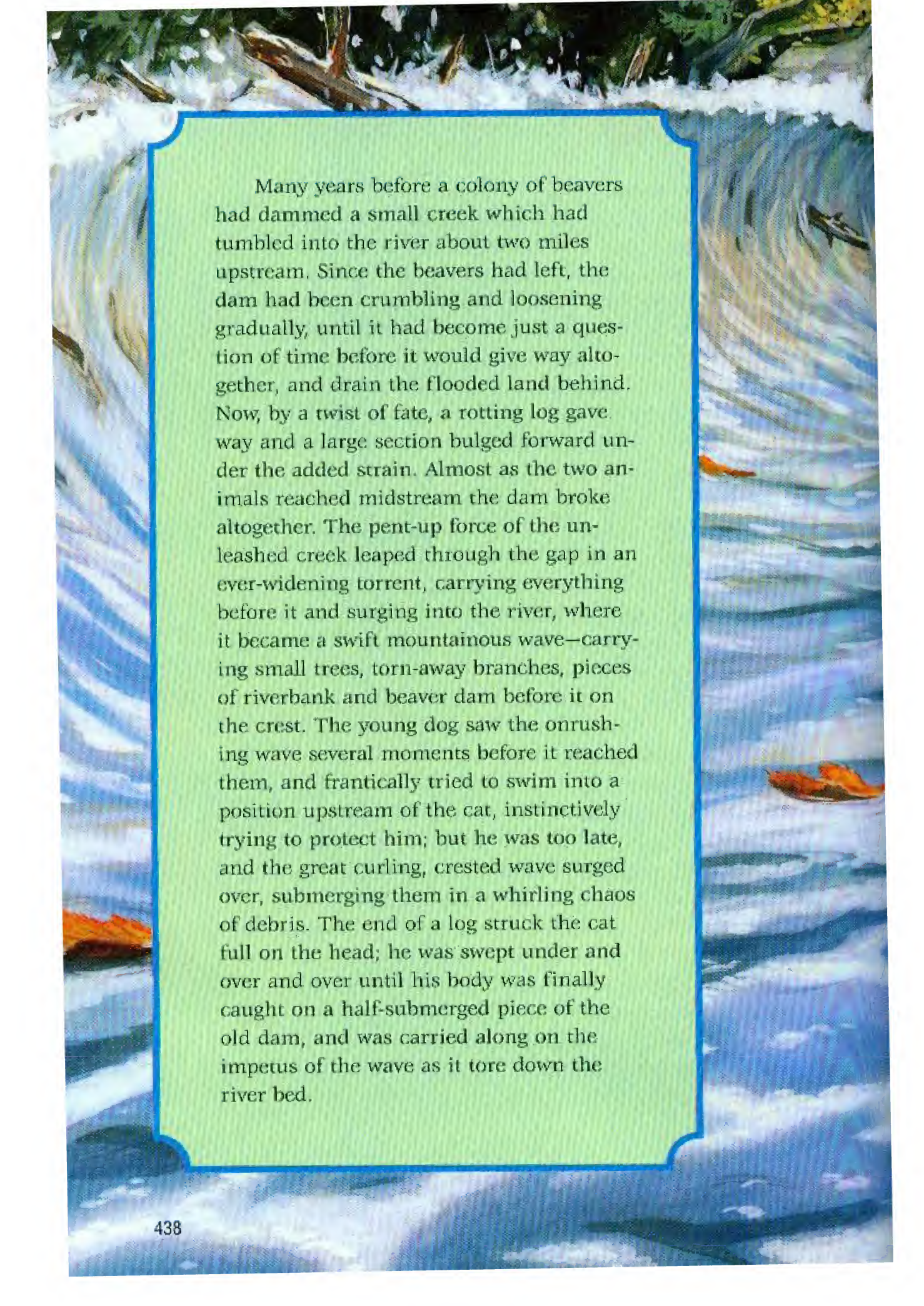
It was lonely, uninhabited country, so that there were no bridges, and the river if anything became wider as they trotted along the banks. After three or four miles the young dog could endure the frustration no longer; he plunged into the water and swam rapidly and strongly across to the far side, his tail streaming out behind like an otter's. He loved the water, and was as much at home in it as the other two hated and feared it. He stood on the far bank, barking encouragingly, but the old dog whined in such distress, the cat yowling in chorus, that he swam across again, paddling around in the shallows near the bank. The old dog walked gingerly into the shallow water, shivering and miserable, turning his head away. Once more the Labrador swam the river, climbed out on the far side, shook himself, and barked. There was no mistaking the command. The old dog took another reluctant step forward, whining



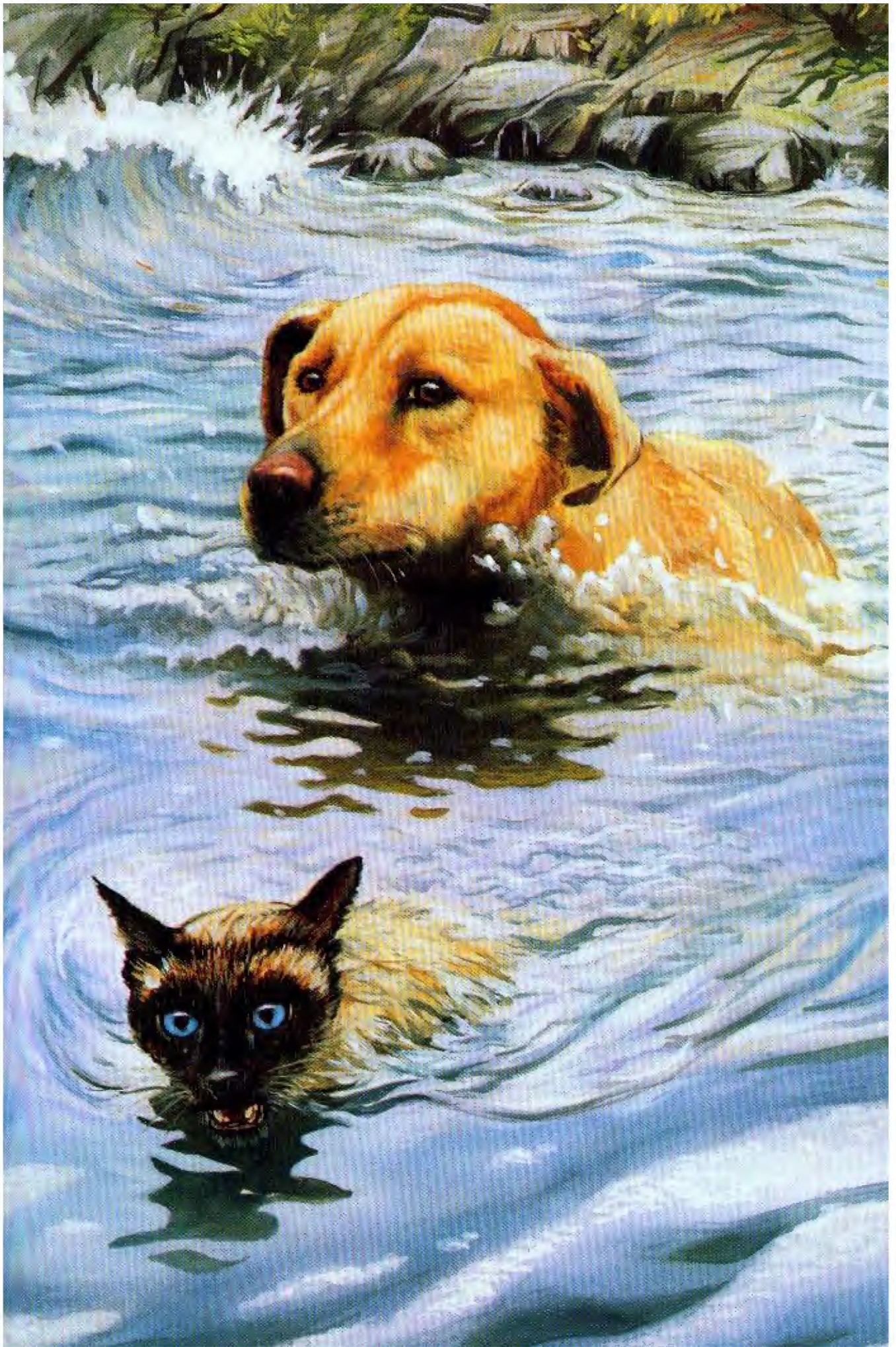


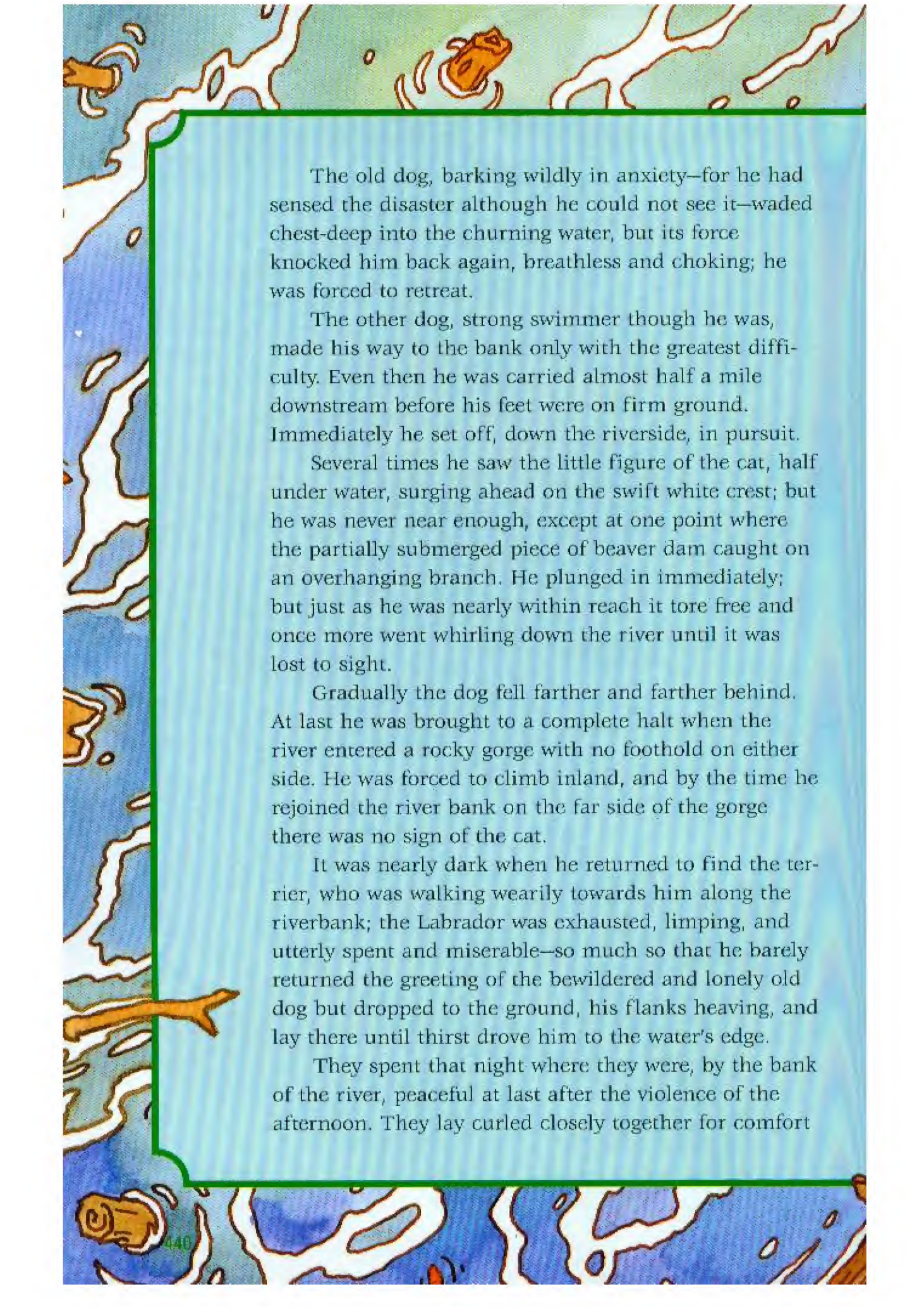
piteously, his expressive tail tucked under. The barking continued; again the terrier advanced; again the Labrador swam across to encourage him. Three times he swam across, and the third time the old dog waded in up to his chest and started swimming. He was not a very good swimmer; he swam in jerky rapid movements, his head held high out of the water, his little black eyes rolling fearfully; but he was a bull terrier, a "white cavalier," and he kept on, following the wake of the other, until at last he climbed out on the far side. His transports of joy on reaching dry land were like those of a shipwrecked mariner after six weeks at sea on a raft: he rushed in circles, he rolled on his back, he ran along with alternate shoulders low in the long grass to dry himself, until finally he joined the Labrador on the bank to bark encouragingly at the cat.

The poor cat now showed the first signs of fear since leaving on his journey; he was alone, and the only way to rejoin his friends lay in swimming across the terrible stretch of water. He ran up and down the bank, all the time keeping up his unearthly Siamese wailing. The young dog went through the same tiring performance that he had used before, swimming to and fro, trying to entice him into the water; but the cat was beside himself with terror and it was a long long time before he finally made up his mind. When he did it was with a sudden blind desperate rush at the water, completely un-catlike. His expression of horror and distaste was almost comical as he started swimming towards the young dog who waited for him a few yards out. He proved to be a surprisingly good swimmer, and was making steady progress across, the dog swimming alongside, when tragedy struck.



Many years before a colony of beavers had dammed a small creek which had tumbled into the river about two miles upstream. Since the beavers had left, the dam had been crumbling and loosening gradually, until it had become just a question of time before it would give way altogether, and drain the flooded land behind. Now, by a twist of fate, a rotting log gave way and a large section bulged forward under the added strain. Almost as the two animals reached midstream the dam broke altogether. The pent-up force of the unleashed creek leaped through the gap in an ever-widening torrent, carrying everything before it and surging into the river, where it became a swift mountainous wave—carrying small trees, torn-away branches, pieces of riverbank and beaver dam before it on the crest. The young dog saw the onrushing wave several moments before it reached them, and frantically tried to swim into a position upstream of the cat, instinctively trying to protect him; but he was too late, and the great curling, crested wave surged over, submerging them in a whirling chaos of debris. The end of a log struck the cat full on the head; he was swept under and over and over until his body was finally caught on a half-submerged piece of the old dam, and was carried along on the impetus of the wave as it tore down the river bed.





The old dog, barking wildly in anxiety—for he had sensed the disaster although he could not see it—waded chest-deep into the churning water, but its force knocked him back again, breathless and choking; he was forced to retreat.

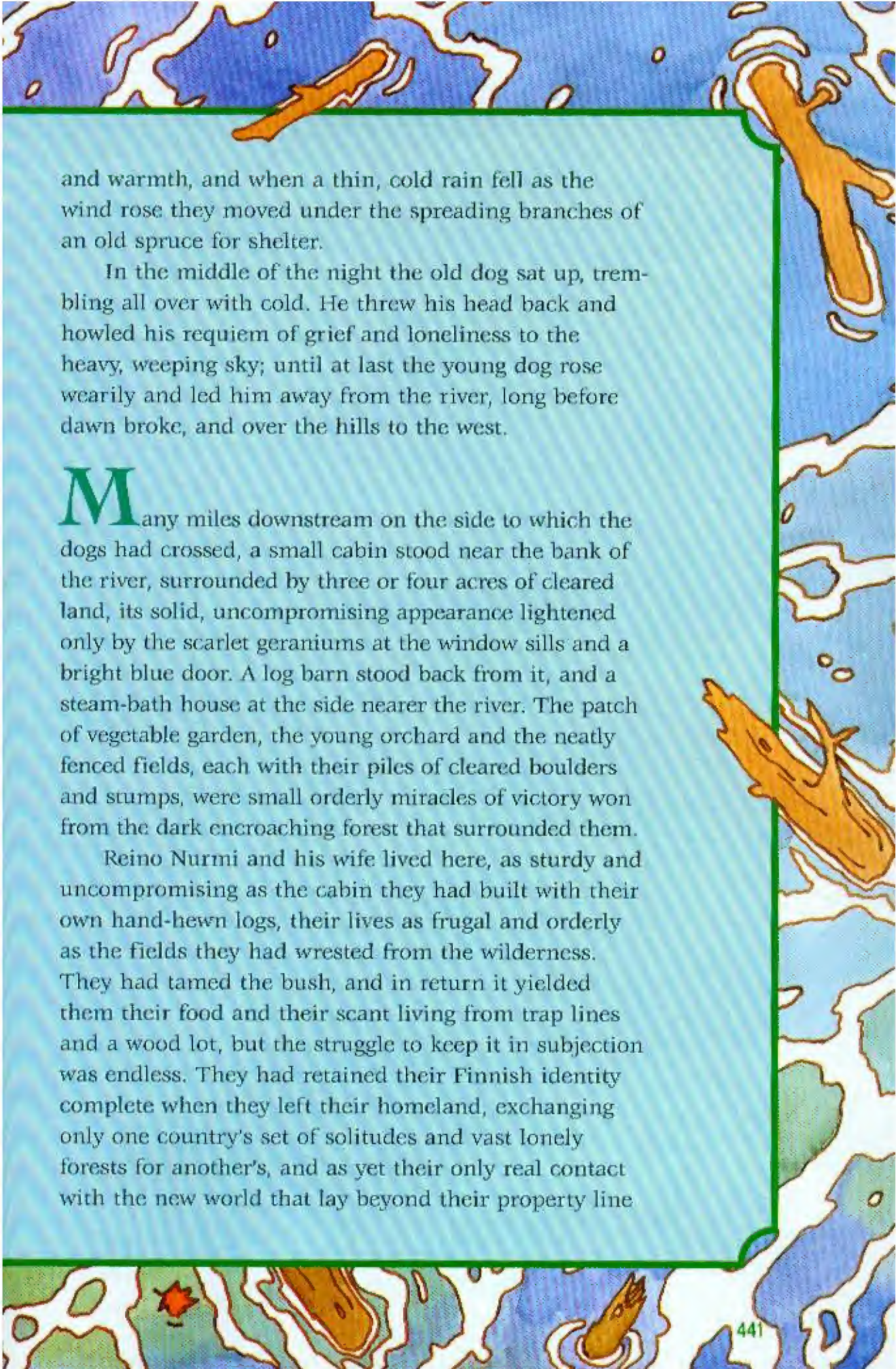
The other dog, strong swimmer though he was, made his way to the bank only with the greatest difficulty. Even then he was carried almost half a mile downstream before his feet were on firm ground. Immediately he set off, down the riverside, in pursuit.

Several times he saw the little figure of the cat, half under water, surging ahead on the swift white crest; but he was never near enough, except at one point where the partially submerged piece of beaver dam caught on an overhanging branch. He plunged in immediately; but just as he was nearly within reach it tore free and once more went whirling down the river until it was lost to sight.

Gradually the dog fell farther and farther behind. At last he was brought to a complete halt when the river entered a rocky gorge with no foothold on either side. He was forced to climb inland, and by the time he rejoined the river bank on the far side of the gorge there was no sign of the cat.

It was nearly dark when he returned to find the terrier, who was walking wearily towards him along the riverbank; the Labrador was exhausted, limping, and utterly spent and miserable—so much so that he barely returned the greeting of the bewildered and lonely old dog but dropped to the ground, his flanks heaving, and lay there until thirst drove him to the water's edge.

They spent that night where they were, by the bank of the river, peaceful at last after the violence of the afternoon. They lay curled closely together for comfort



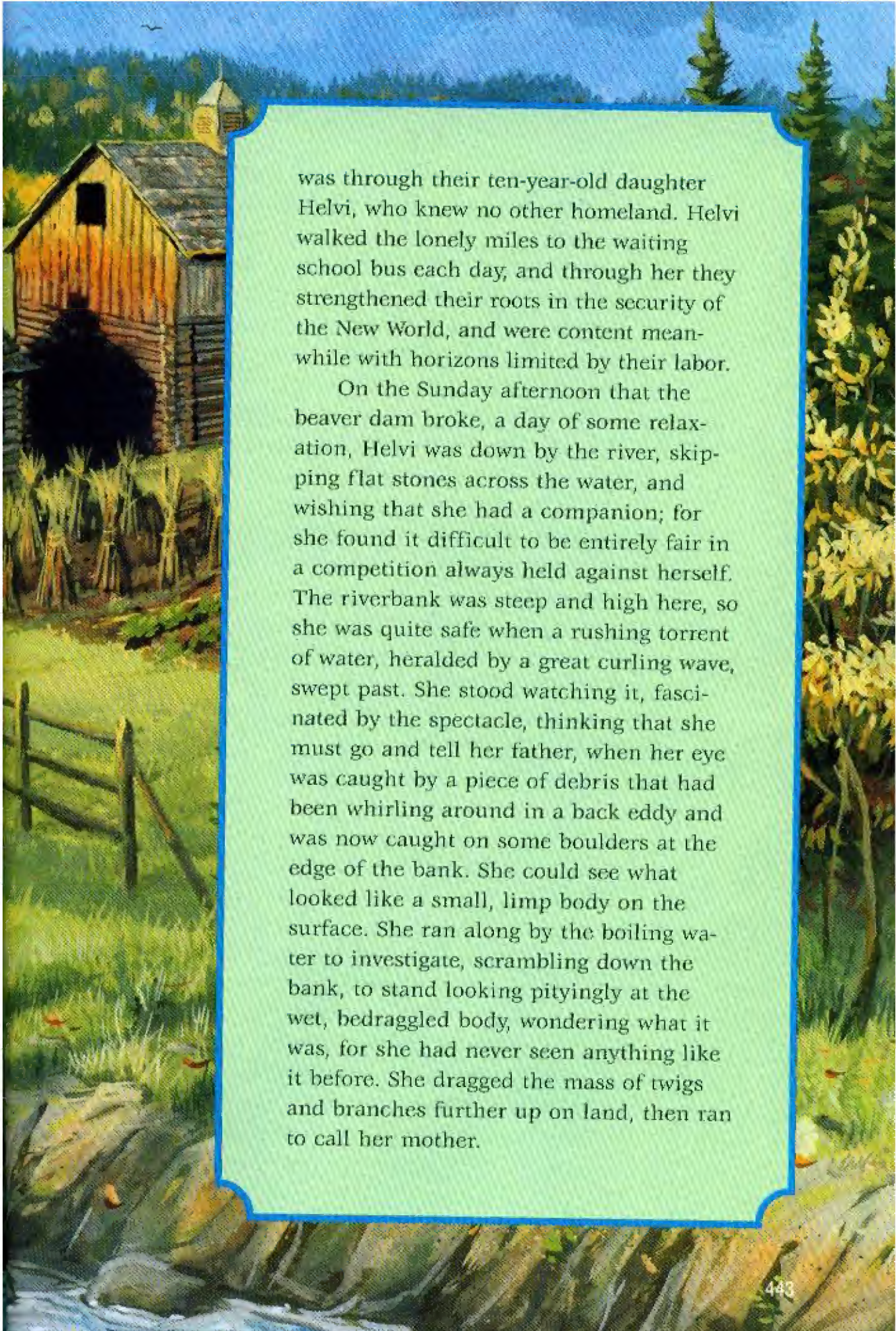
and warmth, and when a thin, cold rain fell as the wind rose they moved under the spreading branches of an old spruce for shelter.

In the middle of the night the old dog sat up, trembling all over with cold. He threw his head back and howled his requiem of grief and loneliness to the heavy, weeping sky; until at last the young dog rose wearily and led him away from the river, long before dawn broke, and over the hills to the west.

Many miles downstream on the side to which the dogs had crossed, a small cabin stood near the bank of the river, surrounded by three or four acres of cleared land, its solid, uncompromising appearance lightened only by the scarlet geraniums at the window sills and a bright blue door. A log barn stood back from it, and a steam-bath house at the side nearer the river. The patch of vegetable garden, the young orchard and the neatly fenced fields, each with their piles of cleared boulders and stumps, were small orderly miracles of victory won from the dark encroaching forest that surrounded them.

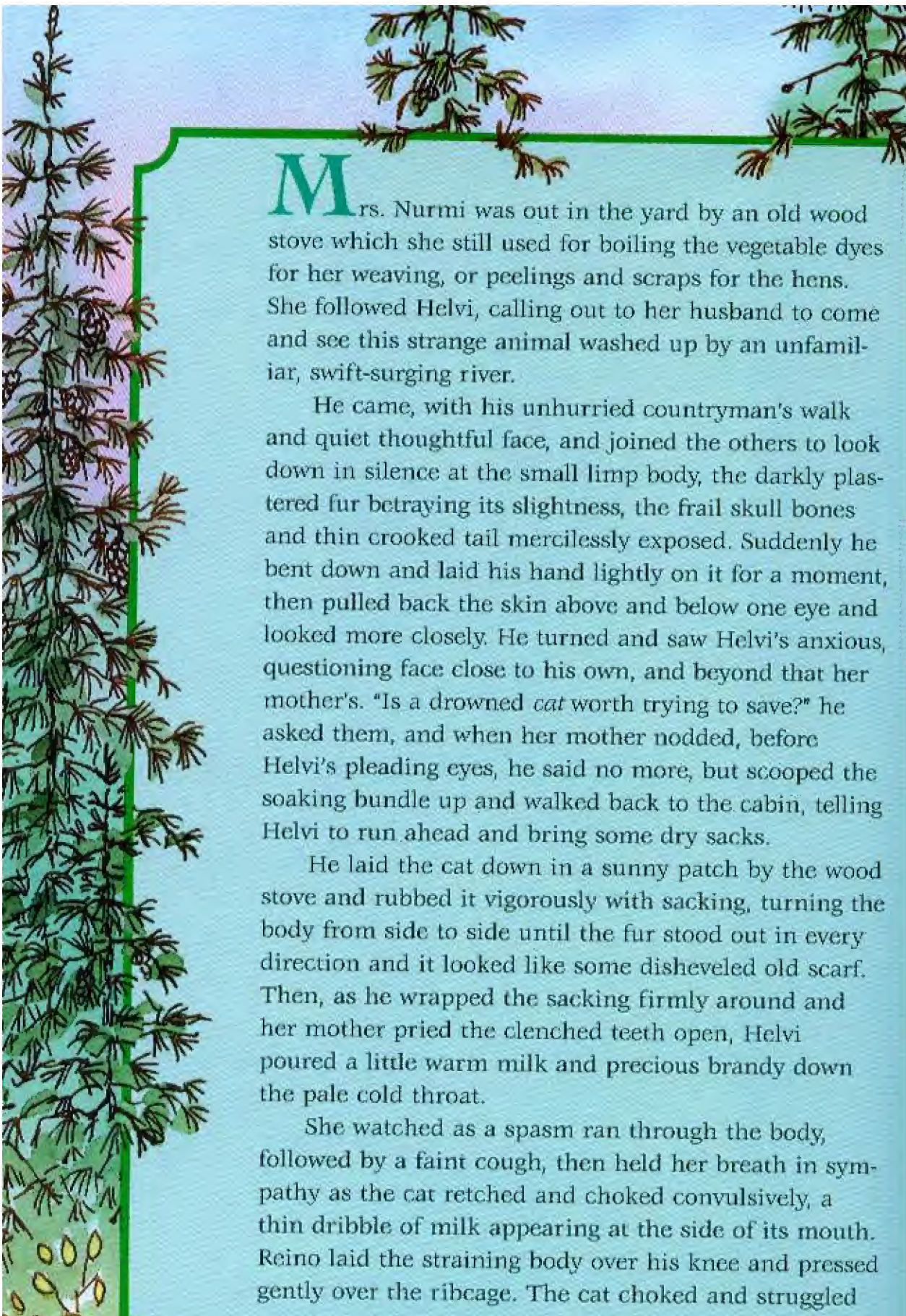
Reino Nurmi and his wife lived here, as sturdy and uncompromising as the cabin they had built with their own hand-hewn logs, their lives as frugal and orderly as the fields they had wrested from the wilderness. They had tamed the bush, and in return it yielded them their food and their scant living from trap lines and a wood lot, but the struggle to keep it in subjection was endless. They had retained their Finnish identity complete when they left their homeland, exchanging only one country's set of solitudes and vast lonely forests for another's, and as yet their only real contact with the new world that lay beyond their property line





was through their ten-year-old daughter Helvi, who knew no other homeland. Helvi walked the lonely miles to the waiting school bus each day, and through her they strengthened their roots in the security of the New World, and were content meanwhile with horizons limited by their labor.

On the Sunday afternoon that the beaver dam broke, a day of some relaxation, Helvi was down by the river, skipping flat stones across the water, and wishing that she had a companion; for she found it difficult to be entirely fair in a competition always held against herself. The riverbank was steep and high here, so she was quite safe when a rushing torrent of water, heralded by a great curling wave, swept past. She stood watching it, fascinated by the spectacle, thinking that she must go and tell her father, when her eye was caught by a piece of debris that had been whirling around in a back eddy and was now caught on some boulders at the edge of the bank. She could see what looked like a small, limp body on the surface. She ran along by the boiling water to investigate, scrambling down the bank, to stand looking pityingly at the wet, bedraggled body, wondering what it was, for she had never seen anything like it before. She dragged the mass of twigs and branches further up on land, then ran to call her mother.




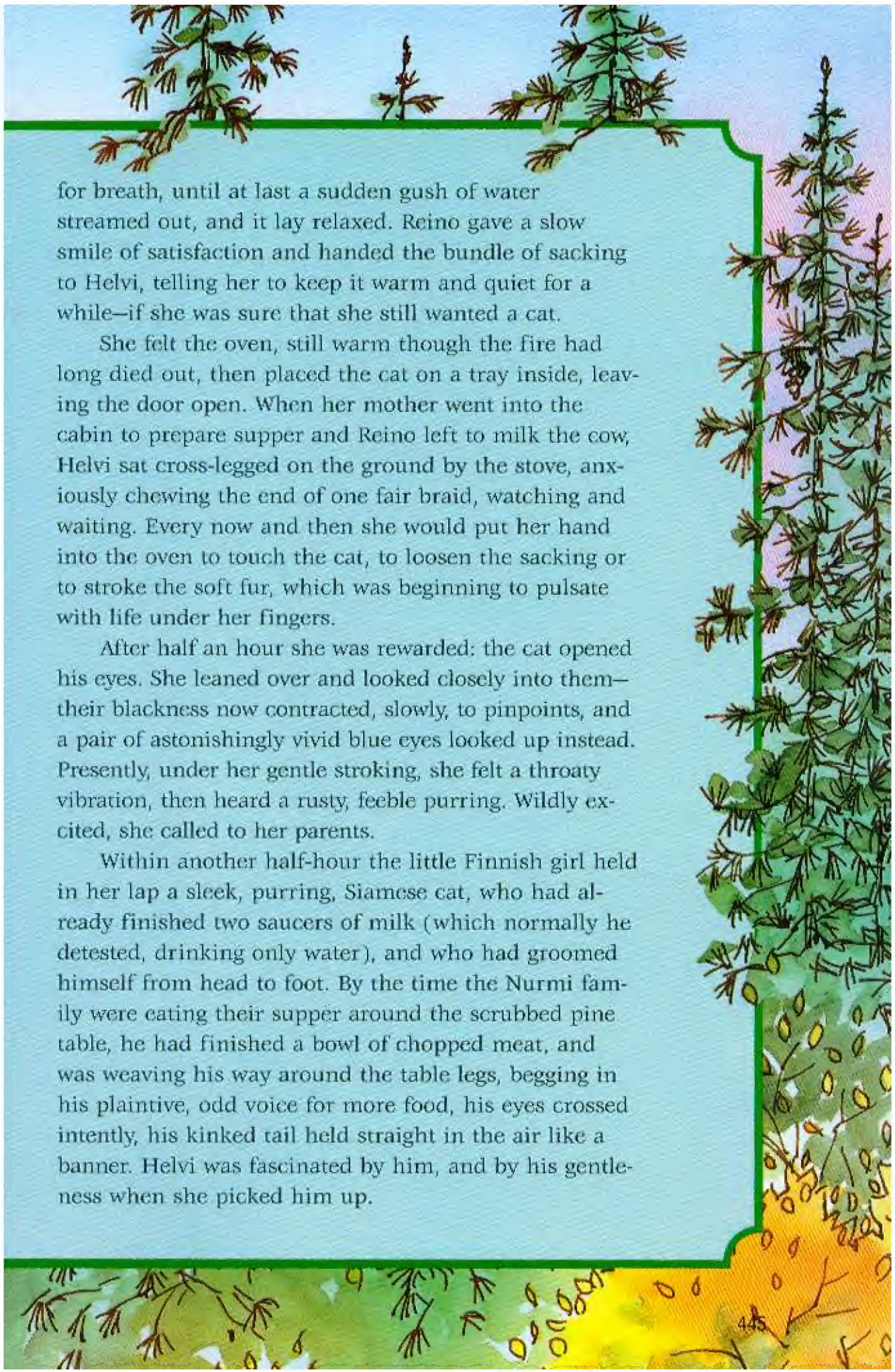
Mrs. Nurmi was out in the yard by an old wood stove which she still used for boiling the vegetable dyes for her weaving, or peelings and scraps for the hens. She followed Helvi, calling out to her husband to come and see this strange animal washed up by an unfamiliar, swift-surging river.

He came, with his unhurried countryman's walk and quiet thoughtful face, and joined the others to look down in silence at the small limp body, the darkly plastered fur betraying its slightness, the frail skull bones and thin crooked tail mercilessly exposed. Suddenly he bent down and laid his hand lightly on it for a moment, then pulled back the skin above and below one eye and looked more closely. He turned and saw Helvi's anxious, questioning face close to his own, and beyond that her mother's. "Is a drowned *cat* worth trying to save?" he asked them, and when her mother nodded, before Helvi's pleading eyes, he said no more, but scooped the soaking bundle up and walked back to the cabin, telling Helvi to run ahead and bring some dry sacks.

He laid the cat down in a sunny patch by the wood stove and rubbed it vigorously with sacking, turning the body from side to side until the fur stood out in every direction and it looked like some disheveled old scarf. Then, as he wrapped the sacking firmly around and her mother pried the clenched teeth open, Helvi poured a little warm milk and precious brandy down the pale cold throat.

She watched as a spasm ran through the body, followed by a faint cough, then held her breath in sympathy as the cat retched and choked convulsively, a thin dribble of milk appearing at the side of its mouth. Reino laid the straining body over his knee and pressed gently over the ribcage. The cat choked and struggled



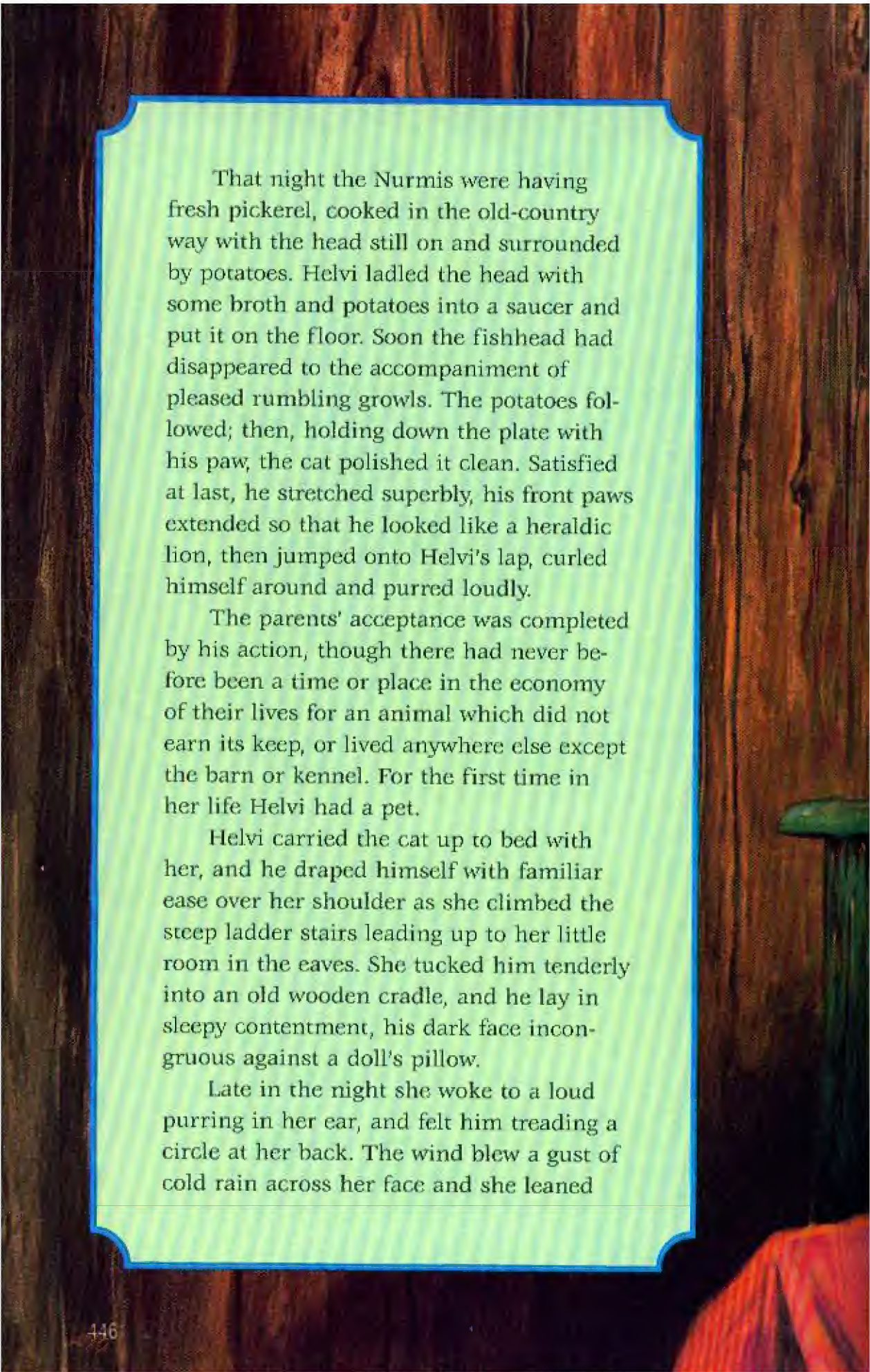


for breath, until at last a sudden gush of water streamed out, and it lay relaxed. Reino gave a slow smile of satisfaction and handed the bundle of sacking to Helvi, telling her to keep it warm and quiet for a while—if she was sure that she still wanted a cat.

She felt the oven, still warm though the fire had long died out, then placed the cat on a tray inside, leaving the door open. When her mother went into the cabin to prepare supper and Reino left to milk the cow, Helvi sat cross-legged on the ground by the stove, anxiously chewing the end of one fair braid, watching and waiting. Every now and then she would put her hand into the oven to touch the cat, to loosen the sacking or to stroke the soft fur, which was beginning to pulsate with life under her fingers.

After half an hour she was rewarded: the cat opened his eyes. She leaned over and looked closely into them—their blackness now contracted, slowly, to pinpoints, and a pair of astonishingly vivid blue eyes looked up instead. Presently, under her gentle stroking, she felt a throaty vibration, then heard a rusty, feeble purring. Wildly excited, she called to her parents.

Within another half-hour the little Finnish girl held in her lap a sleek, purring, Siamese cat, who had already finished two saucers of milk (which normally he detested, drinking only water), and who had groomed himself from head to foot. By the time the Nurmi family were eating their supper around the scrubbed pine table, he had finished a bowl of chopped meat, and was weaving his way around the table legs, begging in his plaintive, odd voice for more food, his eyes crossed intently, his kinked tail held straight in the air like a banner. Helvi was fascinated by him, and by his gentleness when she picked him up.



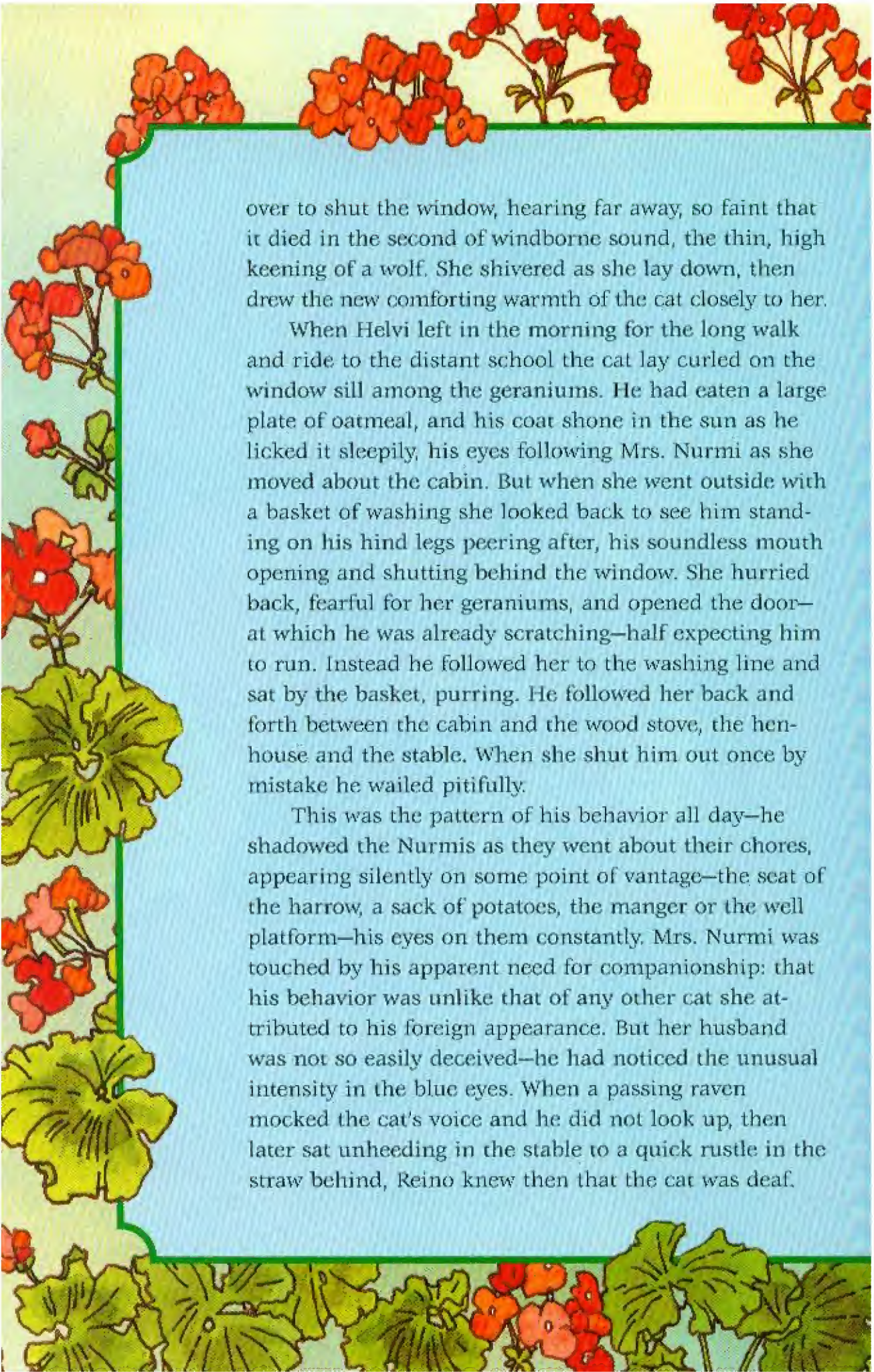
That night the Nurmis were having fresh pickerel, cooked in the old-country way with the head still on and surrounded by potatoes. Helvi ladled the head with some broth and potatoes into a saucer and put it on the floor. Soon the fishhead had disappeared to the accompaniment of pleased rumbling growls. The potatoes followed; then, holding down the plate with his paw, the cat polished it clean. Satisfied at last, he stretched superbly, his front paws extended so that he looked like a heraldic lion, then jumped onto Helvi's lap, curled himself around and purred loudly.

The parents' acceptance was completed by his action, though there had never before been a time or place in the economy of their lives for an animal which did not earn its keep, or lived anywhere else except the barn or kennel. For the first time in her life Helvi had a pet.

Helvi carried the cat up to bed with her, and he draped himself with familiar ease over her shoulder as she climbed the steep ladder stairs leading up to her little room in the eaves. She tucked him tenderly into an old wooden cradle, and he lay in sleepy contentment, his dark face incongruous against a doll's pillow.

Late in the night she woke to a loud purring in her ear, and felt him treading a circle at her back. The wind blew a gust of cold rain across her face and she leaned






over to shut the window, hearing far away, so faint that it died in the second of windborne sound, the thin, high keening of a wolf. She shivered as she lay down, then drew the new comforting warmth of the cat closely to her.

When Helvi left in the morning for the long walk and ride to the distant school the cat lay curled on the window sill among the geraniums. He had eaten a large plate of oatmeal, and his coat shone in the sun as he licked it sleepily, his eyes following Mrs. Nurmi as she moved about the cabin. But when she went outside with a basket of washing she looked back to see him standing on his hind legs peering after, his soundless mouth opening and shutting behind the window. She hurried back, fearful for her geraniums, and opened the door—at which he was already scratching—half expecting him to run. Instead he followed her to the washing line and sat by the basket, purring. He followed her back and forth between the cabin and the wood stove, the hen-house and the stable. When she shut him out once by mistake he wailed pitifully.

This was the pattern of his behavior all day—he shadowed the Nurmis as they went about their chores, appearing silently on some point of vantage—the seat of the harrow, a sack of potatoes, the manger or the well platform—his eyes on them constantly. Mrs. Nurmi was touched by his apparent need for companionship: that his behavior was unlike that of any other cat she attributed to his foreign appearance. But her husband was not so easily deceived—he had noticed the unusual intensity in the blue eyes. When a passing raven mocked the cat's voice and he did not look up, then later sat unheeding in the stable to a quick rustle in the straw behind, Reino knew then that the cat was deaf.

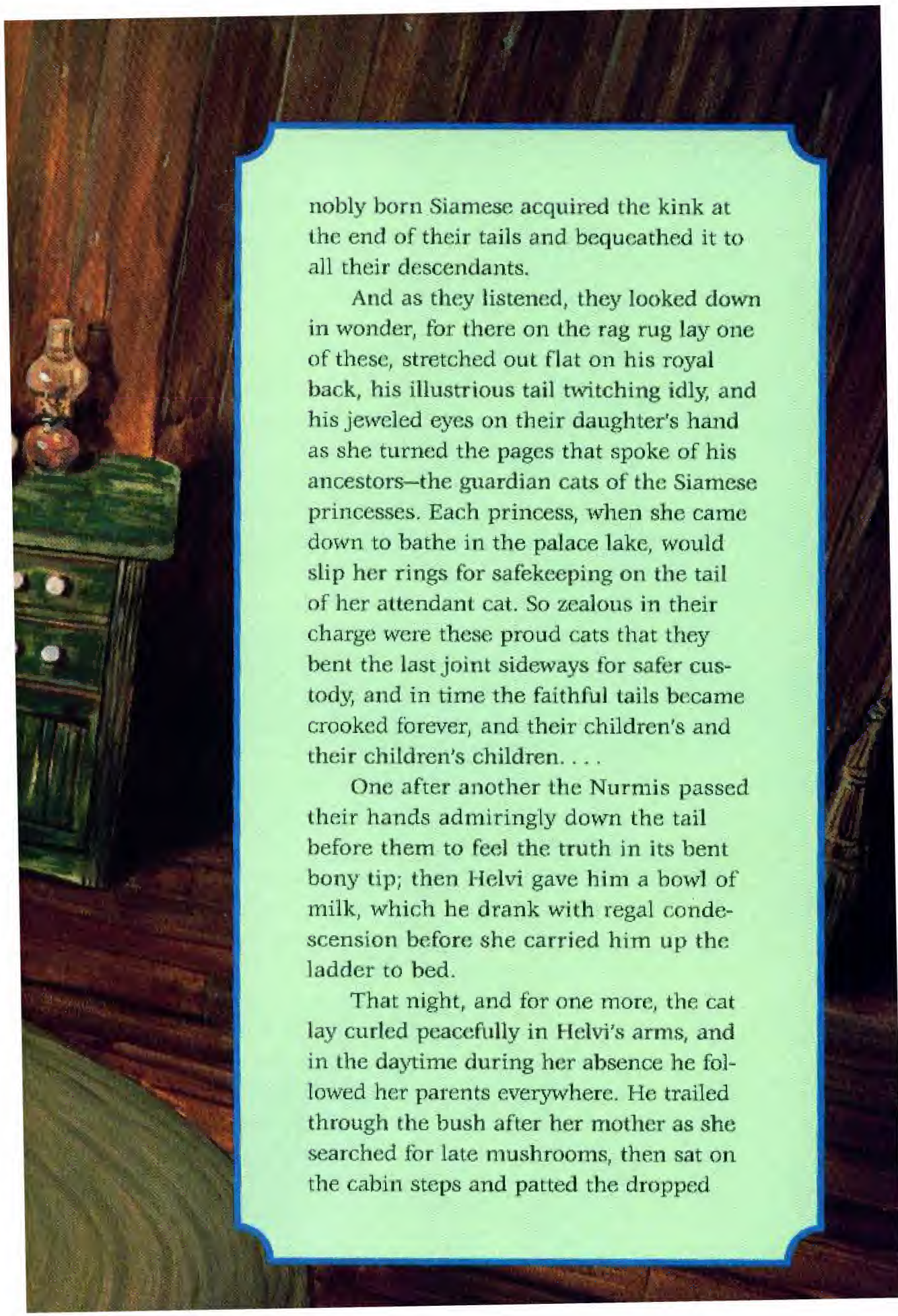


Carrying her schoolbooks and lunch pail, Helvi ran most of the way home across the fields and picked up the cat as well when he came to meet her. He clung to her shoulder, balancing easily, while she performed the routine evening chores that awaited her. Undeterred by his weight she fed the hens, gathered eggs, fetched water, then sat at the table stringing dried mushrooms. When she put him down before supper she saw that her father was right—the pointed ears did not respond to any sound, though she noticed that he started and turned his head at the vibration if she clapped her hands or dropped even a small pebble on the bare floor.

She had brought home two books from the traveling library, and after the supper dishes had been cleared away her parents sat by the stove in the short interval before bed while she read aloud to them, translating as she went. They sat, in their moment of rare relaxation, with the cat stretched out on his back at their feet, and the child's soft voice, flowing through the dark austerity of the cabin, carried them beyond the circle of light from the oil lamp to the warmth and brightness of strange lands. . . .

They heard of seafaring Siamese cats who worked their passages the world over, their small hammocks made and slung by their human messmates, who held them second to none as ship's cats; and of the great proud Siamese Ratting Corps who patrolled the dockyards of Le Havre with unceasing vigilance; they saw, with eyes withdrawn and dreaming, the palace watchcats of long-ago Siam, walking delicately on long simian legs around the fountained courtyards, their softly padding feet polishing the mosaics to a lusted path of centuries. And at last they learned how these



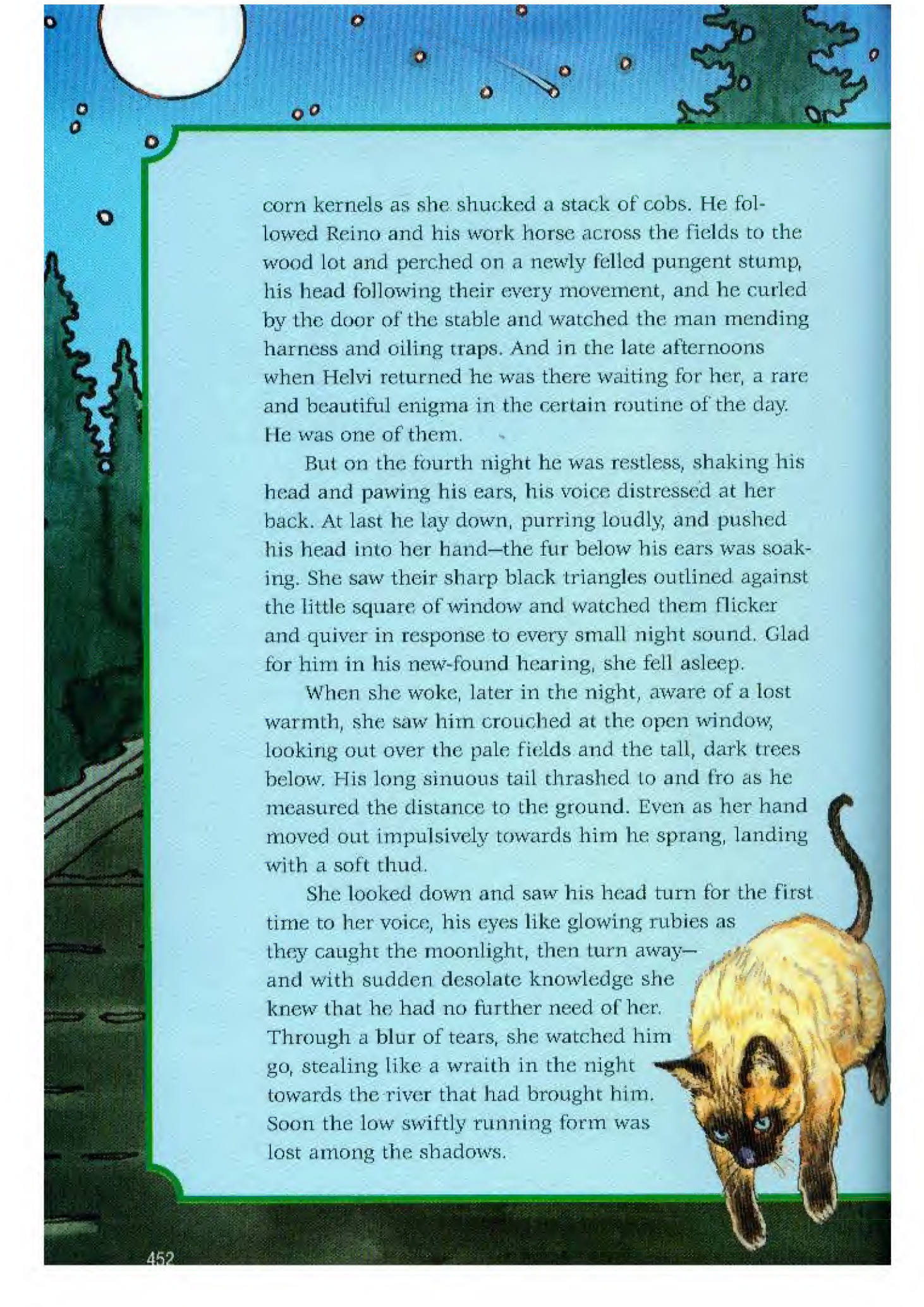
The background of the page is a painting of a rustic wooden interior. On the left, there is a green-painted wooden cabinet or chest of drawers with two drawers visible, each having a round knob. On top of the cabinet sits a small, ornate lamp with a glass chimney and a decorative base. The walls and floor are made of dark, vertical wooden planks. The text is contained within a light green rectangular box with a blue border and decorative, slightly curved corners.

nobly born Siamese acquired the kink at the end of their tails and bequeathed it to all their descendants.

And as they listened, they looked down in wonder, for there on the rag rug lay one of these, stretched out flat on his royal back, his illustrious tail twitching idly, and his jeweled eyes on their daughter's hand as she turned the pages that spoke of his ancestors—the guardian cats of the Siamese princesses. Each princess, when she came down to bathe in the palace lake, would slip her rings for safekeeping on the tail of her attendant cat. So zealous in their charge were these proud cats that they bent the last joint sideways for safer custody, and in time the faithful tails became crooked forever, and their children's and their children's children. . . .

One after another the Nurmis passed their hands admiringly down the tail before them to feel the truth in its bent bony tip; then Helvi gave him a bowl of milk, which he drank with regal condescension before she carried him up the ladder to bed.

That night, and for one more, the cat lay curled peacefully in Helvi's arms, and in the daytime during her absence he followed her parents everywhere. He trailed through the bush after her mother as she searched for late mushrooms, then sat on the cabin steps and patted the dropped



corn kernels as she shucked a stack of cobs. He followed Reino and his work horse across the fields to the wood lot and perched on a newly felled pungent stump, his head following their every movement, and he curled by the door of the stable and watched the man mending harness and oiling traps. And in the late afternoons when Helvi returned he was there waiting for her, a rare and beautiful enigma in the certain routine of the day. He was one of them.

But on the fourth night he was restless, shaking his head and pawing his ears, his voice distressed at her back. At last he lay down, purring loudly, and pushed his head into her hand—the fur below his ears was soaking. She saw their sharp black triangles outlined against the little square of window and watched them flicker and quiver in response to every small night sound. Glad for him in his new-found hearing, she fell asleep.

When she woke, later in the night, aware of a lost warmth, she saw him crouched at the open window, looking out over the pale fields and the tall, dark trees below. His long sinuous tail thrashed to and fro as he measured the distance to the ground. Even as her hand moved out impulsively towards him he sprang, landing with a soft thud.

She looked down and saw his head turn for the first time to her voice, his eyes like glowing rubies as they caught the moonlight, then turn away—and with sudden desolate knowledge she knew that he had no further need of her. Through a blur of tears, she watched him go, stealing like a wraith in the night towards the river that had brought him. Soon the low swiftly running form was lost among the shadows.



Meet Sheila Burnford

The three animal travelers in *The Incredible Journey* might seem like odd companions, but the author, Sheila Burnford, had three pets just like them. Born in Scotland, Burnford moved to Canada with her family after World War II. She brought along a bull terrier named Bill. In Canada, a Siamese cat named Simon joined the family. Later, Burnford's husband bought a Labrador retriever, and the trio was complete.

Burnford was amazed at how well the three animals got along. Bill and Simon even slept in the same basket! Burnford noticed that her pets seemed to show concern for each other. They also seemed able to communicate. As Bill got older, his eyesight worsened. Burnford recalled that the Labrador began to go everywhere with the terrier, "waiting patiently at every place of interest, steering him back on the sidewalk when he would have strayed onto the road. . . ." Their friendship gave her the idea for *The Incredible Journey*.

Burnford's prizewinning novel has been translated into sixteen languages and was made into a movie. Burnford, who died in 1984, also wrote autobiographical stories, articles, and the children's book *Mr. Noah and the Second Flood*.

